

“Spiritual but not religious”

Traditionally, we speak of faith in two ways. One way is about trusting each other in practical matters:

“I have faith that you will do this!”

“Please, everyone, have some faith in the process!”

The second way is about trust God in spiritual matters:

“Lord, increase my faith!”

Recently, however, a third meaning of faith has appeared. It’s about trusting in our own spiritual nature. By one estimate, about 20 percent of Americans call themselves “spiritual but not religious.”¹ Much of this results from legitimate intellectual problems regarding the teachings of some religions. Much results from legitimate outrage at the behaviors of so-called religious leaders. But much also results from the fact that their religious faith is stalled at a childhood stage. They may have grown along the intellectual, moral, and affective branches their lives, but their religious/theological growth has not kept pace. Many adults reject religion as childish. But the problem may not be a childish religion but a childish stage in their own intellectual development regarding religion. For example, many otherwise mature adults have little knowledge of these excellent advances made by believing adults:

There are significant scholarly developments in how to interpret scriptures.

There are significant developments in ethics about how to understand moral principles and the nature of religious authority.

Existential philosophy has given us deeper insights into how to integrate being in love with God and being in love with humans.

At the same time, many non-religious people recognize that they experience at least *the question* of God in their lives:

Judy feels the intellectual drive to learn. Yet she never *decided* to feel the drive. So she asks herself, ‘Where is this intellectual drive from, and where it is taking me?’”

¹ From “Spiritual, But Not Religious,” by Robert C. Fuller. Used with permission from Oxford University Press. Retrieved on November 28, 2008 from <http://www.beliefnet.com/Entertainment/Books/2002/07/Spiritual-But-Not-Religious.aspx>

Bill feels a moral drive to do what is truly better and not just self-satisfying. Yet he too never *decided* to feel this moral drive. So he asks himself, "Even though good people don't always act the way they should, they still desire to. So where does this desire to act morally come from? And why are we such beings for whom better and worse are so important?"

The loving couple, Eloise and Abelard, feel the deeper, affective joy that comes with being in love. Yet their joy is filled with gratitude because they each recognize an inner affective drive to be in love. So they ask themselves, "What moves us to love one another more deeply? And what is moving us together to love others in ever wider circles?"

Indeed, the essential evidence that any self-proclaimed "religious" adults are actually growing spiritually is whether they connect their outer beliefs and practices to these inner intellectual, moral, and affective questions. For many, being religious is mainly a matter of feeling like they belong to something simple, unchanging, and comforting. They have not taken seriously their own intellectual, moral, and affective *questions* because they suspect, deep down, that the answers will be complex, ever-changing, and uncomfortable.

On the other side, many self-proclaimed "atheists" take these questions very seriously. They are determined to be intellectually honest and inquisitive; determined to live with moral integrity; determined to let their lives be centered on love.

So who has faith here? Who doesn't?

Faith Defined

To more fully understand what faith actually means to people today, it will help if we can define faith in a way that is oriented to something that transcends or is "beyond" the merely human yet still covers both "religious" and "not-religious-but-spiritual" people. So let me give a definition here and then explain what it means:².



² I formulated this definition from the one proposed by Bernard Lonergan in his *Method in Theology* (New York: Herder & Herder, 1972), p. 115. He defines faith as "the knowledge born of religious love." In later works, Lonergan also refers to a "transcendent love" that opens a person to loving God completely. I prefer speaking of "transcendent" rather than "religious" because it more explicitly covers "spiritual but not religious" people.

Faith is the knowledge of values born of transcendent love.

What does this mean? First, by *definition*, I mean something technically precise, not something descriptively vague. To understand this definition, let us look at its terms.

We humans can recognize values not only through ordinary reasoning, but also through a knowledge that comes from being in love. For isn't it true that when we fall in love, the whole world looks more promising, a good place? We more naturally appreciate other persons. We more easily forgive offenses even though logic tells us to get even. In other words, being in love gives us an eye for what is truly valuable—a moral knowledge. As the philosopher Pascal put it, "The heart has reasons unknown to reason." And in St. Exupery's *The Little Prince*, the omniscient fox says, "We do not see very well, unless we see with the heart."

The knowledge of values born of love is not some secure possession. It is quite insecure—a risk. And it keeps on moving. By its very nature, human love keeps widening. And as it does, it cracks opens our shells, expands our horizons, and enlarges our world. When we fall in love, we emerge from a dense forest of inner confusion and enter an open meadow that stretches as far as the eye can see. We become better selves by *transcending* the selves we are. What *transcending* refers to is our experience of becoming more "open" to life. This occurs along three three very distinct paths:

- more open to learning,
- more open to doing better,
- and more open to letting our love bloom.

So a *transcendent* love is a love that keeps moving us to love more widely and deeply. As adults feel more poignantly the question of God described above, they feel invited to let their love go all that way as well. Not that anyone can love everyone; not that anyone can love any one person perfectly. But there is in us a drive, an impulse, an urge, almost a demand, that we trust love more than logic or reason or personal advantage.

In this analysis, what happened to many influential religious leaders (prophet, priest, imam, rabbi, founder, evangelist, etc.) is that they saw the value of taking a specific path because they were moved by this transcendent love. Without necessarily calling it "faith," they saw certain values because they let love open their hearts in a way that self-satisfied people do not. This prior, often unnoticed "faith" is what moved Abraham to leave Ur, moved Matthew to leave his tax-collector table to follow

Jesus, moved Mohammed to walk to Mecca and to write the Quran, and moved Mother Teresa to find and serve God in the dying in India.

By dropping these big names, I don't mean to suggest that faith is extraordinary. It is quite common; anyone in love is self-transcending and sees values because of their self-transcending love. Those who believe that there is an order "above" the human—a "super-natural" order—will welcome their love as a supernatural gift that heads in a supernatural direction. It is "natural" for them, then, to join with others to live in self-transcending ways. This is what makes a religion.

Of course, the faith of all people, whether or not they belong to a religion, can range from a nascent and barely noticed faith in their own being in love to a fully and consciously committed faith in God.

A barely noticed faith will show in an aversion to study, in an addiction to moral certitude, and in a fear of the messes that true love involves.

A robust faith will show itself by always desiring true values over mere self-comforting satisfactions. Among those true values is the value of intellectual growth—understanding more deeply what life is all about from the perspective of love. There is also the value of moral growth—understanding what is really better in situation after situation. And there is the value of affective growth. Affective growth in faith sprouts when one takes seriously the question of the source of one's transcendent love. It blossoms in a realization that welcoming one's own transcendent love is already a faith in the God who is this love, who created everything on account of this love, and by which love prepares an earthly family of love destined for an eternity with this Lover.

-Tad Dunne